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ABSTRACT

This paper describes activities and evaluation of the KinderApache Song and Dance Project, piloted in a kindergarten class in Cedar Creek (Arizona) on the White Mountain Apache Reservation. Introducing Native-language song and dance in kindergarten could help foster a sense of community and cultural pride and greater awareness of traditional values, as well as serve as a handy language-learning device. A parent survey indicated strong community support for the project, and the songs and dances were chosen with careful preparation. Project evaluation was planned in terms of enthusiasm generated and skill mastery. The children were expected to coordinate three skills simultaneously: singing, dancing, and beating a rhythm. A videotape documented 3 hours of song and dance instruction and parts of a field trip in which a community elder introduced Apache words to teach about cultural practices and plants used in traditional healing. Parents and grandparents attended a final performance of the songs and dances and then took part in a focus group discussion. Positive outcomes included increases in student knowledge of and pride in their culture, the children beginning to sing the songs spontaneously, at least one child beginning to use Apache outside the classroom, and reinforcement of the school's image as a focal point of community. Problems included high turnover in school staff, school budget constraints, difficulty in finding a facilitator with pedagogical expertise, and religious controversy in the community (Christians' opposition to traditional dances). (SV)

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Teaching Indigenous Languages

KinderApache Song and Dance Project

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RC 021 336

KinderApache Song and Dance Project

M. Trevor Shanklin, Carla Paciotto, and Greg Prater

This paper presents the results of the evaluation of the KinderApache Song and Dance Project (KASDP) that was piloted in a kindergarten class at John F. Kennedy Day School in Cedar Creek on the White Mountain Apache Reservation. The report illustrates the issues involved both in the implementation and the assessment of the project. The following outcomes were observed: the children gained knowledge of and pride in their culture, the children began to sing the songs they had learned spontaneously, at least one child began to use the Apache language outside the classroom, and the image of the school as a focal point of the community was reinforced.

In the Winter 1995 special issue of the *Bilingual Research Journal* devoted to language maintenance among various American Indian groups, the former president of the Navajo Nation Peterson Zah is quoted as saying:

> It is a priority of the Navajo Nation President and a dream of the Navajo Division of Diné (Navajo) Education to some day take control of their own education. It is the mission of the Division of Education to assure that all Navajo people have the opportunity to be educated, and to be able to carry on the work of building the Navajo Nation. Navajo young people need to be proud that they are Navajo and hold respect for the heritage, land, and people to which they belong. They need to be able to build strength from their culture, language, and history, and have faith in their own potential. (Begay et. al., 1995, pp. 136-137)

This is in face of a dramatic decline in use of Navajo since the mid-1950's. Between 1980 and 1990 the proportion of English-only speakers, age 5 and older, on the Navajo reservation doubled from 7.2 to 15 percent (Crawford, 1995). The percentage of young children who are Navajo speakers has fallen from 95% in 1969 to 52% in 1993. In a special program introduced at Fort Defiance Elementary in 1986, the researchers found that "only a third of incoming kindergartners had even passive knowledge of Navajo. Less that a tenth of the five-year-olds were reasonably competent speakers of Navajo" (Holm & Holm, 1995).

The developments on the Navajo Reservation are typical for the decline of American Indian languages in the last few decades. In all of Canada, "only 13% of children ages 5-14 speak their indigenous languages" (Freeman et al., 1995, p. 41). Nonetheless it is the expressed policy of the United States and a number of tribal governments to arrest this language shift. The Native Ameri-

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can Languages Act of 1990 states, "The status of the cultures and languages of Native Americans is unique and the United States has the responsibility to act together with Native Americans to ensure the survival of these unique cultures and languages" (as quoted in Reyhner & Tennant, 1995, p. 285). As the quote from the former president of the Navajo Nation illustrates, in addition, there is a strong pedagogical aspect to the issue of language maintenance, namely increasing the self-esteem of the indigenous student population. One reason for this is summarized by Jordan in describing the history of the KEEP/Rough Rock collaboration: "Good education is made better when cultural knowledge is used to inform the selection and development of educational practice" (1995, p. 97). Another reason is the sense of culture conveyed by the language. A Mohawk speaker noted that Mohawk teaches "'the core of the culture,' respect and thanksgiving…through the language one learns that what one does affects oneself and everyone else, reinforcing a sense of being connected" (Freeman et al., 1995, p. 63).

A survey of bilingual education programs among Native American populations in Canada concludes that "the continuing sense of family and community [is] the primary route for indigenous language learning" (Freeman et al., 1995, p. 46). But this is also a potential problem area in revitalizing a language in a state of decline as "finding Aboriginal language instructors has sometimes been a problem… Limited availability has meant that classes may not be offered as readily as desired" (Freeman, et al., p. 57-58).

Based on one of the author's experiences working in teacher-training programs in Portugal and Hungary, the sense of culture and community is most strongly expressed in the sharing of folk songs. The number of folks songs that students and teachers know is phenomenal and songfests can continue until the last person drops. This was also an avenue for sharing cultures; i.e. singing English folk songs is an integral part of the English as a Foreign Language (EFL) community.

Zepeda, who has done research on the Tohono O'odham of Southern Arizona, writes how oral story-telling traditions are transmitted to the written English works of the children. A special place is allotted for songs that are considered as "'flowers for the ears.' Songs are stimulating and enjoyable in the oral medium in the same way that objects and experiences are stimulating to other human senses" (Zepeda, 1995, p. 7).

The proposal to introduce song and dance in the Kindergarten in the native language at John F. Kennedy (JFK) Day School could help foster a sense of community and pride in the culture and greater awareness of traditional values, in addition to serving as a handy language-learning device. A parent survey indicates that there is strong community support for such a project, and a process of careful preparation was involved in choosing the songs and the dances.

Project implementation

Unfortunately, the problem of finding elders who are competent in the language, familiar with the traditions and available hampered the timely imple-

mentation of the project. As of the first week in November 1996, when the project was to have been reaching its conclusion, a medicine man had still not been found. In addition two key persons in the project, the kindergarten class teacher and the Apache teacher aide, left at the beginning of the school year, along with three other staff members. The Apache teacher aide was especially critical to the success of the project, and it seems that the school's financial constraints also played a role in the inability to replace her.

This supports a point made by the investigators of the successful Rough Rock Elementary School bilingual program on the Navajo Reservation: "none of the changes described here is possible without the presence of a stable core of local bilingual teachers" (Begay et al., 1995, p. 133). They go on to say that a necessary condition for facilitating change is that "there must be consistency and longevity of local program personnel and staff development opportunities, along with a firm commitment to program goals" (Begay et al., p. 135). We do not think the evidence from this paper supports this as a necessary condition: they are simply factors that were at hand or developed at Rough Rock. But the situation at JFK illustrates that the same conditions that plague the community also strike back at attempts to nurture a culture conducive to fostering change and building self-esteem.

Research design

We were of the opinion that an evaluation of the project should measure its success in terms of enthusiasm generated and success in mastering the skills taught. As the kindergarten teacher stressed in a meeting on December 6, 1996, at JFK school, the children were expected to coordinate three separate skills: simultaneously, singing, dancing, and beating a rhythm. Their success at doing this could best be evaluated by the kindergarten teacher and through video-tapes. In the December meeting we asked about a focus group discussion with parents and teachers (i.e. the kindergarten teacher and the Apache song and dance instructor). All present supported this concept. From the focus group, we planned to obtain data that bore on the two issues highlighted above: enthusiasm of the children and their success at mastering the skills. We agreed that the focus group was to be audio-taped and the tape used as a basis to compare notes taken during the discussion.

Results and discussion

The data analysis included analyzing the qualitative notes and the tabulated data. The video presented two main parts: extracts of a day-long field trip of the kindergarten class escorted by the bilingual and kindergarten teachers and led by a community elder knowledgeable in traditional Apache culture, and three hours of dance and song instruction. Three major themes of cultural transmission, pupil involvement, and skill mastery emerged from the analysis of the qualitative notes and the tabulated data collected during the viewing of the video, demonstrating the extent of the relevance of the program in maintaining native Apache culture.

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The high amount of cultural content transmitted during the field trip was the main feature in the interaction between the Apache elder and the kindergartners. The children were exposed to traditional cultural practices, such as the building of a cairn for devotional purposes, and heard about the history of the sacred path where the cairn was going to be built. The elder also picked and showed plants traditionally used for healing purposes and demonstrated how to make a traditional drumstick for the song and dance program, and the bilingual teacher showed how the grinding stone was employed in past times by Apache groups. Throughout the trip, the elder and the bilingual teacher spoke in Apache and addressed objects and practices with their Apache names.

The elder was able to keep the attention of the children with a gentle and natural way of speaking and interacting. He pointed to traditional gender rules in the different practices ("girls used to grind"), and he also emphasized the need for "not being in a hurry" when making a drumstick and pointed at the beauty of the drumstick's shape. In addition, the elder created a sense of continuity between present and past history through his narrative of the sacred path.

During the second part of the video, a majority of the children were dressed up in traditional clothes and demonstrated their awareness of the importance of the attire (e.g., a girl kept adjusting her dress in a very caring way) for the singing and dance rehearsal that took place in the gym. Some boys appeared to be very conscious of their good skills in mastering the Crown Dance. In one of the classroom instruction sessions, they were showing off their dance steps, while during the gym rehearsal they modeled the steps for less-skilled boys.

The second theme that emerged from the video was the high level of involvement of the children throughout the field trip and song and dance instruction. All of the children demonstrated their enjoyment of the activity by participating in a very cooperative and sociable manner, always smiling and well behaved.

Finally the third theme, the mastery of the various skills involved (i.e., dancing, singing, and beating the drumsticks) in the instruction was evident. It was observed that the general mastery of the dances and songs was a function of the difficulty of the overall task and of the pedagogical/instructional practices. In general, the more complicated the task, the less likely the children were able to master it.

Specifically, when the children were given the opportunity to master one skill at a time, they achieved a higher proficiency. When the teacher had the children sit in the formation of a choir in order to only sing, they all participated and achieved a high level of skill mastery. Similarly, the children seemed to accomplish the tasks more skillfully when the teacher divided them into different groups with separate tasks (i.e., a group played the drums while another danced around) in turn-taking fashion and often varied the songs and dances. In this way, the children also tended to stay on task for a longer period of time.

On the other hand, when the task was compounded by asking the students to perform the three skills at the same time, their level of skill mastery lessened

and one task overshadowed the others. In general, the singing was the most demanding task for the children to accomplish, and in the final rehearsal the children all danced and beat the drumsticks but failed to sing more than the first verse.

Final performance and focus group

The setting for the final performance and focus group discussion was the gymnasium at JFK Elementary in Cedar Creek. A potluck dinner was held for parents and grandparents. The program evaluators, the Apache bilingual program coordinator and her husband, a first-grade Native American teacher, eight of the 17 children in the class (all dressed up, most traditionally), the principal, the kindergarten teacher, and the school counselor also attended.

The Apache bilingual program coordinator sang and played the drum for the dances. The children were extremely well behaved. They sang with gusto, especially an Apache version of Old McDonald. During the performance, many parents were taking pictures. After the break, the children ended the performance with a circle dance where the three boys were sitting in a circle and the girls dancing around them. All the girls but one would step back and dance in a line while the remaining girl continued to dance around the boys until she tapped one on the head, who would then get up and dance around with her arm-in-arm before sitting down again.

The kindergarten teacher started off the focus group discussion, after the initial period of silence, by conveying his still very favorable impressions of the field trip. At first there was very little response, but gradually the parents opened up to the evaluators and started responding to each other. We were very careful not to comment on their observations but just to facilitate the discussion. When asked, those present were 100% in support of program (14 present). One participant said, and others showed their agreement, that they would like the children to read and write in Apache (According to the Apache bilingual program coordinator, only 12 people know how to read and write Apache; the orthography was approved by the tribal council in the 70's). The issue of potential language conflict arose. There seemed to be widespread agreement that learning (at least some) Apache would not impede students' English acquisition.

One person commented that she did not feel it would be a problem if the children learned the native plants in Apache; this would not hinder their development in English. Another woman added that she was sorry she did not find out from her mother and grandmother the names of the plants. The Apache bilingual program coordinator interjected that during the field trip a little girl said she would show the kindergarten teacher a plant that is used to make a medicinal tea with. When asked if the program should be extended, everyone nodded agreement. A grandmother expressed concern about the dances conveying non-Christian religion as she would like her grandchildren to be brought up as Christians. The Apache bilingual program coordinator, who said a prayer to start the potluck and who another participant observed had sung Christian

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hymns in Apache, spoke softly and at some length of the distinction between learning the songs and dance and the religious issue. The KASDP grant writer, a former teacher at JFK, ended the session by describing how she had watched the sense of Apache identity growing in the children and suggesting that arrangements should be made for the parents to watch the videotapes.

Other views from project participants

Concerning the impact on language skills, the kindergarten teacher remarked in the meeting on December 6 that "he is starting to hear Apache words from the children and starting to learn some himself. Also the children sometimes spontaneously break out into song and dance." During our final visit, the kindergarten teacher once again informed us that the children often start spontaneously singing some of the songs they have learned when engaged in other tasks. This is a quote from the focus group discussion:

> I think the project was very important for them as Apache children who didn't know very much about their culture…They are singing those songs now in the classroom as much as they sing "Mary Had a Little Lamb."…It just feels right to me.

During the focus group discussion, the kindergarten teacher repeated his very positive impressions of the early field trip that he had mentioned in our conversation from November:

> It was a wonderful day for me and for the children. It was informative and interesting…The medicine man showed the vegetation and what it was used for. He would take a few steps in any direction and show 10 different plants. He managed to keep the children's attention even at the age of 5.

The Apache song and dance instructor noted in our December meeting that "the songs were picked up easily by the children but retention was more difficult for those pupils who were not being raised in an Apache-speaking home."

Religious controversy

In a conversation in November 1996 the grant writer informed us that two parents did not agree about the implementation of the project because of their religious beliefs. One child was pulled from the class for this reason. He was happy that the great majority of the parents had agreed to their children's participation. In our January meeting, the school psychologist also discussed the religious controversy surrounding the project. She said:

> Children get confused because of religious conflict. Once, last year, an eighth grader brought a pamphlet from the…Church in which they

showed Heaven and Hell—the Crown Dancers were at the gates of Hell.

She was concerned about the impact of the pamphlet on the self-esteem of the child.

Summary

This brief description of the KASDP provided here documents the difficulties in implementation as well as the positive impact of the project on the children, the school, and the community. The impediments, many endemic to a project of this nature, pay tribute to the success of the project by testing the ideas that it embodies in the practicalities of actual school life. The children, school staff, and community all responded positively. The children were involved, enjoyed themselves, and took an obvious pride in their culture. Parents were supportive as shown in their initial agreement to the project, the dressing up of the children for the videotaped performance in December, attendance at the final performance, and the remarks shared with the focus-group facilitators. Some of those impediments were high staff turnover in the school, school budget constraints, difficulty in finding a facilitator, the lack of pedagogical expertise on the part of the facilitator, and the religious controversy in the community concerning traditional Apache dance.

We think that it is quite likely that the project had the positive impact on self-esteem desired. For that really to be measured, similar projects need to be implemented throughout the curriculum. There is widespread support for an extension of the project, and we can only hope that funds can be found to accomplish this.

Any extension of the project would be helped by building in a staff-development component to train facilitators and to assist the regular classroom instructor in integrating such projects into the curriculum. For other facilitators we would recommend keeping in mind that the less difficult a task is, the greater the mastery by the children. Group work can easily be used. The children seemed to be on task when divided into several groups, with each group engaged in a separate activity. This is aided by the fact that the children are very social, as was strikingly seen during the break periods. Individual prompting also allowed the facilitator to monitor which of the children were actually learning the songs. In individual groups some boys modeled the dancing for others. This kind of peer support can be encouraged.

The value of the program extends beyond the positive effects seen on the children. As we have seen in the focus group, the school can become a center for an intergenerational meeting where community members can discuss issues involved in the maintenance of their culture. When the Bilingual Program Coordinator responded to the religious concerns of some of the parents and grandparents, the focus group session became a forum for reflection. As Fishman writes, we cannot rely only on the school for cultural transmission. However,

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the school can be a focal point for this discussion, provided there is a strong, supportive community:

> these institutions should foster the language as links with the outside world, with the informal interactions that constitute the bulk of life, the crux of intergenerational mother-tongue transmission. (Fishman, 1996, p. 194)

Note: The authors would like to thank the White Mountain Apache Tribe and the principal and staff of John F. Kennedy Day School in Cedar Creek for inviting us into their community. A special thank to Michia Guy-Childs and Bonnie Lewis for their passion and persistence.

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